

BOOK REVIEW

M. Dobb, *The Development of Socialist Economic Thought. Selected Essays by Maurice Dobb* Edited and Introduced by Brian Pollitt, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2008

This book consists of five essays by the late Maurice Dobb, the famous British Marxist economist, and an Introduction by his literary executor, Brian Pollitt, who selected the essays. Four have been previously published in English and one in Italian.

Dobb's first chapter ('Socialist thought') was originally an encyclopaedia article. It is a clear and accurate exposition. Its conclusion (pp. 58–59) turned out to be absolutely right. "Long-term planning in the Soviet Union has set itself the goal of maintaining an industrial growth rate in the neighbourhood of 10 per cent [p.a.] during this [the 1960s] and the ensuing decade, and of overtaking the US economy both in absolute production and in per capita production at an early date. Much in the comparative economic judgment of the two systems will no doubt turn on the result." It was the failure of the USSR to achieve these targets that played the main role in its collapse.

Dobb's second chapter was originally a lecture, given in 1967, to mark the centenary of the publication of volume 1 of *Capital*. It is a good non-technical exposition of Marxist political economy. It lacks altogether a critical evaluation. Probably Dobb thought that far too many—ill-informed—criticisms of Marx's work had already been published and that it was more useful simply to explain its main ideas.

Dobb's third chapter is about the Soviet discussion of the 1920s about building socialism. He accepts the (retrospective) Bolshevik interpretation of War Communism (according to which War Communism was forced on the Bolsheviks by the Civil War) an interpretation that subsequently was criticised by Laszlo Szamuely (whose work is mentioned positively in Dobb's final chapter) and Paul Craig Roberts. His analysis of the views of Trotsky and Preobrazhensky is one-sided, as is his view of the role of agriculture in economic development. He even refers (p. 96) to "rich peasant farmers" although "peasants" are not "farmers" and neither are they "rich". Nor did Bukharin advocate (p. 96) a "new Stolypin-policy". There is no mention of the ways (distortion of statistics, price policy, macroeconomic imbalance, the creation of a shortage economy, belief in erroneous theories, inability to understand the economic processes at work) in which the Communist Party caused the problems it faced by its own beliefs and policies. The statement (p. 101) that by the end of 1926 industrial production had been restored to the pre-war level is based on probably inflated official Soviet statistics and does not take account of the fact that the highest pre-Soviet level of industrial production was in 1916 rather than in 1913. The idea that further growth would have to come from new investment (p. 101) ignores the fact that some capital goods industries (coal, oil, electricity) had grown substantially compared with 1913 whereas consumer goods industries (food, drink, tobacco)

had not. What this latter sector needed was not more investment but larger agricultural marketings. Dobb confuses (p. 102) *grain* output with *agricultural* output, failing to notice the expansion of livestock output and its consumption of grain (stimulated by Party price policy). In the discussion of the agricultural situation in 1928 there is no explicit mention of Stalin's procurement methods in Siberia in early 1928 and their inevitable consequences. NEP was introduced in 1921 not 1920 (pp. 80 and 109). In his discussion of the Feldman model he neglects to point out that it was used to justify unfeasibly high rates of growth, the attempt to realise which had disastrous economic consequences. In his account of the discussion of the 1920s, no mention is made of the sad fate of most of the participants in the discussion (which is however pointed out by Pollitt in his Introduction). Overall this chapter is likely to mislead the reader and it would have been better not to reprint it.

Dobb's fourth chapter, about planning, was written in 1972 and published in translation in 1976 in an Italian encyclopedia. He treats capitalist planning as something which began after World War II, ignoring the 1935 Dutch *Plan van de Arbeid* (perhaps justifiably since it was not a state document and was not implemented) and Nazi economic planning (Goering's Four Year Plan). There is nothing about Japanese or South Korean economic planning and no mention of Tinbergen's writings on the subject. The main emphasis is on Soviet and East European planning. His overview of the history of Soviet economic planning manages to ignore both the famine of 1931–1934 and that of 1946–1947 (both of which were taboo for Communist Party members in 1972). He correctly draws attention to the information problems facing planners. He also quite rightly notes that (p. 134) "by the end of the decade [of the 1930s] the economy of the country [i.e. the USSR] could be said to have virtually constituted a war economy, with the methods and degree of centralisation customary thereto." He stresses the problems of the centralised model and argues for what was known as 'economic reform'. He does not consider whether 'economic reform' would make the situation worse, nor does he discuss the relationship between 'economic reform' and 'transition to capitalism' (which took place years after this chapter was written). The chapter reflects the period in which it was written in another way—it ignores the manifest failures of planning in the third world. This is shown by such formulations as (p. 145) "planning in one form or another has become in recent decades a part of the creed of an increasingly wide circle of underdeveloped countries." The reader who wants to know about the disappointing record of planning in the third world as known and analysed at the time Dobb wrote this essay will have to turn to books such as Streeten and Lipton, *The crisis of Indian planning* (1968) and Faber and Seers, *The crisis in planning* (1972). The essay was of course written too early to take account of the abandonment of planning (but not of state regulation of the economy) in China. The chapter ends with a naïve statement of faith in computers and their ability to solve the problems of what was called in the USSR in the Gorbachev era the 'administrative-command' economic system. This technocratic 'solution' to a socio-political problem is very strange for a Marxist. This chapter is now very dated.

The last chapter was written in 1976 and originally published in a rather inaccessible publication. It is a defence of 'economic reform' from a Marxist perspective.

In the Introduction, Pollitt sets Dobb's work in its historical and political context. He also provides valuable biographical information, including an account of the criticism he received in 1932 (during the Comintern's 'third period', i.e. the ultra-left anti-Social Democratic period 1928–1935) from within the British Communist Party. He defended himself vigorously and refused to recant. Why he was not then expelled from the Party is left somewhat unclear. (Perhaps it resulted from divisions in his local branch.) The Introduction ends up by bringing the story up to date and making the case for state intervention in the economy today, various goals for which are mentioned. They are all benevolent, and the idea that state intervention might be used to maintain the riches and political power of ruling elites, or for war preparations, are conspicuous by their absence.

This book will be of useful to anyone interested in the ideas of Maurice Dobb, perhaps the most important Communist Party economist in the West in the twentieth century. The first two of Dobb's chapters will be useful to students and political activists seeking a short non-technical introduction to socialism or Marxist political economy. The final chapter may be of interest in Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea or other countries trying to 'build socialism' and also to members of Communist Parties elsewhere (e.g. India). The reader seeking a critical evaluation of Marxism, an overview of economic planning which does not concentrate on a partial analysis of Soviet and East European planning, or an up to date introduction to Soviet economic history, should look elsewhere.

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